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Parents are not born, they are made: a critical discourse analysis of an educational magazine in Flanders (Belgium)

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Parents are not born, they are made: a critical discourse analysis of an educational magazine in Flanders (Belgium)

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Central to this article is a case study of one particular governmental instrument in Flanders, the educational magazine 'Klasse voor Ouders' (Klasse for Parents). This popular magazine aims to provide information for and communication with parents as one of the target groups in the educational field. Despite the claimed formal and neutral character, in this study, we assume that 'Klasse voor Ouders' plays a larger role by contributing to the (re-)organisation of the public debate. We suggest that through the 'order of discourse' and thus, through what is said and written, an educational reality is created in which parents and the government are 'positioned' and are asked to reflect on themselves and to act in a well-defined way. By means of a critical discourse analysis in line with Fairclough, we illustrate how parents are understood as having a continuous 'drive' for improving the quality of their own parenting practice while the government is positioned as in charge of and in control for creating a kind of 'parental learning community'.

Keywords: governmental instrument; critical discourse analysis; power effects; parents and education

Introduction

The changing relationship between the government and the public sector is a widely discussed issue. As a research topic, this issue gained increased importance in the 1990s with authors indicating that society leans more and more towards the neoliberal range of ideas through an increasing familiarity of economic thinking in policy contexts. Numerous authors assume that this has led to a changed relationship between the government and the educational field, labelled 'a withdrawing government' (de Kam and de Haan 1991), 'a post-welfare state' (Klaassen 1996; Larner 2000), 'a neoliberal state' (Dale 1997; Larner and Walters 2004; Olssen, Codd, and O'Neill 2004; Wielemans 1996–97) and 'an advanced liberalism' (Dean 1999; Haahr 2004; Rose 1996; Rose and Miller 1992); and characterised by processes of 'decentralisation' (Dale 1997; Verhoeven and Elchardus 2000), 'deregulation' (Fuhrman and Elmore 1995; Verhoeven and Elchardus 2000), '(output) control' (Dean 1999) and 'meta-coordination' (Dale 1997; Karsten 1999). Although this (changed) relationship has been investigated in several ways and from diverse

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perspectives, little attention has been paid towards new policy instruments developed in this context and towards changes in the relationships among parents, the educational field and the government. The aim of this article is to address these issues by providing a detailed analysis of policy instrumentation that seeks to govern parents in their relation with the field of education.

An important step in the analysis of policy instrumentation was taken by Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007). These authors assume that policy instruments are an important focus for critical research on public policy because they reveal the specific relation between those who govern and those who are governed. More specifically, policy instruments are not neutral; they have specific effects that are partly independent of their aims, which lead them to structure policy and the relationship between the governors and the governed according to a specific logic. Recently, innovative work on a variety of new policy instruments has been conducted by Newman, Barnett and Mahoney (2010). Their main contribution was the development of empirical grounding for the ways that new media and information technologies, which initially seem to undercut traditional notions of the public sphere and to open up a range of innovative possibilities for public communication, are cross-cut by older institutional, political and cultural practices. Despite this important contribution, further studies focussing on the role of modern media and communication in constituting the meanings and practices of the public space are needed (see also Barnett 2004). Our study addresses this challenge by examining in detail a project for parents launched by the Flemish government: the educational magazine 'Klasse¹ voor Ouders' (Klasse for Parents). The main objective is to come to an understanding of how 'Klasse voor Ouders' contributes to the (re-)organisation of the public sphere, in which education and the role of parents is debated.

The government has long been involved in families in general and in parenting specifically. Today, however, there is an emerging focus on and concern with parenting as well as an intensification of governmental intervention in the spheres of parenting (Jones and Miller 1996; Moran, Ghate, and Merwe 2004). For instance, in the UK, parents are seen as increasingly responsible for counteracting criminality and the development of antisocial behaviour in society (James 2009) and for decreasing the growing social inequalities in education (Ball 2010). In Belgium (and particularly in Flanders), similar trends seem to be the case which has led to a more active and intervening role of the government in parenting. This is not only evidenced by several policy initiatives related to, for instance, parent participation with regard to schooling, but also by an abundance of manuals, courses, literature, advices, etc., for parents (Ramaekers and Suissa 2013; Van Crombrugge, Vandenhoele, and Willems 2008; Vandemeulebroecke and De Munter 2004). According to Ramaekers and Suissa (2013, 15), it becomes clear that, at policy level, there is an agreement on the important role of early child-rearing patterns for the social, emotional and intellectual development of children and on the fact that not intervening in families in order to improve the 'outcomes' of parenting would be a sign of moral and political failure. In many countries, the government thus has begun to focus on improving parenting skills through diverse parenting support initiatives under the assumption that this will help solve the 'crisis' of childhood (Kehily 2010). At the same time, numerous popular reality television programmes, broadcast in many countries (including Flanders, Belgium), such as *Supernanny* and the *House of Tiny Tearaways*, have made parenting increasingly visible. Although presented as

a way to get childhood back on track, several authors raise concerns about this situation. So does Kehily (2010) assume that all sorts of policy initiatives and media texts do not address the signals of childhood catastrophe but rather collectively produce a dominant discourse of childhood in crisis. Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) express their concerns about the narrow sense of 'responsibility' that is used to frame the parent-child relationship, noting that it seems to reduce good parenting to the concrete and correct application of scientific knowledge. Consequently, they argue, parenting is increasingly defined as a 'profession' rather than as 'practice'.

Against this tendency towards the increased professionalisation and responsabilisation of parents, it is worthwhile to examine 'Klasse voor Ouders', a communication project of the Ministry of Education of the Flemish Government that aims to increase the involvement of parents within education by offering them specific information. 'Klasse voor Ouders' is an extension of the magazine 'Klasse' (for teachers and principals), which has been distributed to all primary and secondary schools since 1990. Because parents increasingly bought and read the original 'Klasse' and teachers seemed to appreciate a special issue of 'Klasse' aimed at enhancing parents' involvement in school, 'Klasse voor Ouders' was published for the first time in September 1996 (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming 2007). 'Klasse' has been expanding by reaching new target groups, increasing the amount of copies, creating new means of reaching its target groups (e.g. websites, electronic newsletters) and hiring more employees, establishing an important position for itself within the field of education.² A study by Devos et al. (2002) clearly indicates that 'Klasse' has become a successful and important source of information within the field of education: 100% of teachers in primary and secondary education know the publications of 'Klasse' very well, and 80% think it is a very important source of information about education policy. The same is true for the magazine 'Klasse voor Ouders', which is known by 96% of parents with children in primary schools and by 84% of parents with children in secondary schools. There is no indication that the magazines' prominent role in the field of education is decreasing.

'Klasse voor Ouders' is an example of the new policy instrumentation and the changing relationship between government and education that considers information and communication to be of strategic importance. Beyond the self-proclaimed aims of communication, information and support, however, it is important to achieve a better understanding of the function and effects of the magazine as a policy instrument. Drawing on an earlier study (Verckens, Simons, and Kelchtermans 2009), we assume that the communication and support organised through 'Klasse voor Ouders' has a specific scope and intervenes in a particular way in the field of education. Moreover, although 'Klasse voor Ouders' (and thus the government) seems to understand itself as a neutral governmental policy instrument, we believe that through the selection of themes and topics, the use of specific documentaries, the promotion of good practices, lists of tips and tricks, and advice, steering occurs. In other words, the magazine includes steering mechanisms beyond the classic 'carrot' and 'stick' by discursively creating a specific educational reality and by addressing, and hence positioning, the readers (parents) in a well-defined way in that reality. Therefore, by using a critical discourse analysis (CDA), this article intends to clarify how 'Klasse voor Ouders' positions parents within the field of education and how it drives understandings of what the role of parenting is and means.

The ‘order of discourse’ and the ‘positioning’ of parents

Discourse analysis, generally understood in line with Foucault and Fairclough, addresses language as a discursive practice that can be studied not only at the level of intention (of the speaker) but also in terms of the reality that is constituted through the discursive order that emerges in written or spoken language. Hence, we begin from the assumption that the magazine creates an educational reality through a specific ‘order of discourse’; that is, ‘what has been said and written’ establishes a specific reality (Ball 2009; Codd 1999; Olssen, Codd, and O’Neill 2004). This established reality can be regarded as a space for thinking and speaking (Simons and Masschelein 2006) and thus as a space where certain actions are imaginable, possible and even obvious, whereas others are not (Verckens, Simons, and Kelchtermans 2009). Consequently, it can be assumed that the magazine ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ includes a discursive order that positions the reader (the parent) and the government as well as their relationship in a well-defined way. We use the concept of ‘positioning’ to identify how an order of discourse prescribes how agencies and actors should behave and interrelate. Therefore, an analysis of the order of discourse in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ provides specific meaning to the idea that parents are not born but made (Cruikshank 1999). The focus is on the way parents should act and behave based on how the magazine talks and writes about them.

CDA: methodology and design

To conduct a systematic analysis of the function of the magazine ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ in the context of Flemish education, a particular methodology is required. Because our aim was to investigate the positioning effect of the order of discourse in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’, we drew on the work of Fairclough (1992, 1993, 2003; see also Phillips and Jorgensen 2002), particularly his so-called method of CDA, to make visible the educational reality created by ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ and thus the constituted space of thinking, speaking and acting for parents in relation to the government. This approach of discourse analysis was selected from many variants, such as discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards 1997; Potter and Wetherell 1987) and conversation analysis (e.g. Ten Have 1999). CDA was chosen because it pays attention to the presence of power dimensions in discursive practices and allows us to examine steering mechanisms in education policy instrumentation (see). Furthermore, CDA allows us to go beyond the micro-level of ‘ordinary’ and institutional conversations (e.g. doctor–patient conversations or police interrogations) by paying attention to media and organisation discourse (the meso-level) (Rogers 2008; van den Berg 2004). It is important to stress, however, that this study did not follow Fairclough’s method of CDA entirely. While Fairclough explicitly includes a social analysis that focuses on social practices and the actual social positioning of actors, our focus is limited to the power effects of discursive orders. In line with Foucault’s (1982) idea of governing as the ‘conduct of conduct’, the focus of this study is how the order of discourse in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ creates a discursive reality and consequently positions parents by suggesting good conduct within that reality. The focus in other words is on the power effects of discursive practices through creating a new ‘public space’ for ‘good parental conduct’. Investigating the ‘order of discourse’ in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ helps us to uncover how language actually works and how

through ‘what has been said’ a specific reality is shaped that asks people ‘to behave’ in a particular way (Ball 2009; Codd 1999; Verckens 2011).

In line with previous research (Verckens, Simons, and Kelchtermans 2010), the work of Fairclough was elaborated into an analytical framework that distinguishes three levels of a discourse: the text, the discursive practice and the positioning (see Figure 1). The *text analysis* focuses on linguistic features and content in the articles by distinguishing three aspects: ‘representation’, ‘action’ and ‘discursive identities’. The ‘representation’ aspect refers to the different themes that are discussed in the articles of the magazine as well as the diverse perspectives, from which these themes are treated (Fairclough 2003). The focus is on the questions ‘What are they talking about?’, ‘How are they talking about the content?’ and ‘Who is talking?’. The second aspect, ‘action’, concerns the performative dimension of the textual account and includes a focus on the format of the text (e.g. an interview or summary) as well as the text actions (e.g. informing or convincing). Finally, we focus on ‘discursive identities’ by analysing what is written/told about parents and other actors in the educational field as well as their relationship with each other. In contrast to Fairclough, we use the term ‘discursive identities’ instead of ‘identification’ as our focus is on what is written/told about parents and other participants in the magazine ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ and not on their actual social role in the educational field. Moreover, whereas Fairclough aims at investigating how people identify themselves and others, our aim is to reveal the discursive practice of the magazine, and thus, how parents are positioned through how they are portrayed and approached in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’.

In the next step, we move to *the order of discourse* by interpreting the results of the text analysis. It is assumed that the themes in the educational magazine, the perspective from which these themes are presented, the diverse text formats and actions, and the discursive identities constitute specific discursive patterns; hence, a particular ‘order’ can be identified (Fairclough 1993). Drawing on the results of the text analysis, the order of discourse is studied by focusing on the prevailing discourses (ways of representing), genres (ways of discursive acting) and profiles of characters (ways of being) (Fairclough 1997). Whereas the textual analysis focuses on the representation, action and discursive identities of every article in every magazine separately, the analysis of discursive practices looks for patterns in the educational magazine as a whole, assuming that the order of discourse of the magazine is composed of a combination of specific discourses, genres and profiles of characters.

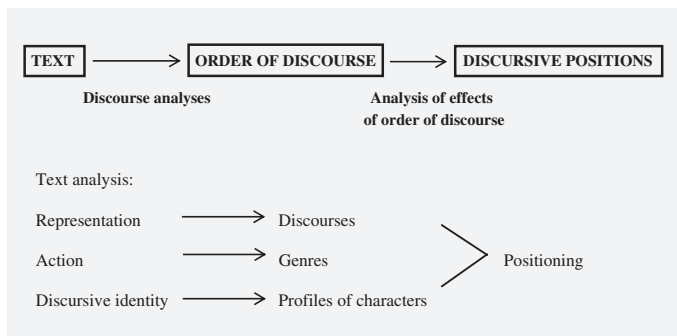


Figure 1. Conceptual scheme of the CDA of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’.

Finally, we elaborate on the power effect of the order of discourse in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ by investigating how parents and the government are ‘positioned’ through the specific order of discourse. The term ‘positioning’ in our framework does not refer to the actual social positioning of actors within the field of education but to how the order of discourse within the educational magazine creates a particular space for thinking, speaking and acting, and as part of that discursively positions both the government (that is, the responsible publisher) and parents (that is, the readers of the magazine) in that reality. Hence, we adjust the third phase of Fairclough’s analytical framework (the social analysis) to our own research interest, that is, the power effects of discursive practices that make up the public space for debating parenting.

In our study of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’, we searched for the ‘positioning’ of parents and the government by investigating the different numbers of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ (the text) with the aim of making the order of discourse (the discursive) visible. This approach can be refined in specific research questions: (1) *What is the ‘order of discourse’ in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ – that is, the combination of specific discourses, genres and profiles of characters?* and (2) *How are the parents and the government ‘positioned’ through the ‘order of discourse’ in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’?* We use a purposive sample of sixteen issues of the magazine ‘Klasse voor Ouders’. Moreover, we choose the very first eight issues of the magazine (year 1996–1997)³ as well as the most recent publications during the analysis phase of this study (2008–2009). This approach allows us to track a possible evolution in the order of discourse. Hence, for the two research questions, the focus is also explicitly on evolutions in orders and positioning. A report was made of every article, containing the findings of the text analysis. By using the same formal structure of the report for every single article, we looked for systematic similarities and differences to identify particular patterns across the articles (the so-called across-case analysis technique: Glaser 1965; Strauss 1987). Because our primary aim was to reveal the power effect of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’, the results of the text analysis are not included in this article.

‘Klasse voor Ouders’: discourses, genres and characters

We present the results of the analysis by first discussing the different discourses, genres and profiles of characters as well as their evolution. This helps us to examine how ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ positions parents in relation to the government and finally to uncover the power effects in terms of the constituting of the public space, in which parenting and education is debated.

Discourses

Based on the textual analysis, several discourses – various ways of representing and framing educational issues – can be identified in the educational magazine. We first present the discourses in the old magazines, followed by the discourses in the more recent issues.

In the issues of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ from the beginning period (1996–1997), a *risk-prevention discourse* can be identified that presents education and parenting in a broader context and as a stepping-stone to suitable behaviour in society. Within this discourse, education and parenting are understood as practices, in which individuals

learn specific norms and values. In most cases, the first page of the magazine raises a social problem: for example, road safety (*Klasse voor Ouders* no. 4, 1996, 1⁴), drugs (no. 6, 1997, 1) or aggression (no. 7, 1997, 1). In the related articles, the societal importance of these problems is emphasised, clarified and illustrated, and the role and responsibility of parents is stressed, as evidenced in statements such as: 'Are you just as careful to other kids when you are driving?' (no. 4, 1996, 4) and 'If parents do not take responsibility, aggression will become a major problem' (no. 7, 1997, 4). The defining characteristic of the risk-prevention discourse is that it represents reality in terms of possible risks or dangers and regards parents as responsible partners in preventing risks.

The second discourse that is visible in the magazine is the *normative-educational discourse*. This discourse recommends specific parenting ideals and focuses on how to reach these ideals. The discourse puts parenting in a normative frame by defining 'good parenting' and presents how this parenting should be enacted by parents. The discourse is exemplified in tips and tricks concerning rewards and punishments (no. 5, 1997, 2) and how parents can read aloud to stimulate children's development (no. 6, 1997, 2). However, the main aim of the ideals presented in this type of discourse is not to improve parenting practice itself but to enhance the quality of educational practice in schools, as the following quotes demonstrate: 'Many schools and teachers make considerable efforts to get your children to read. Schools, and sometimes even classrooms, have their own libraries, talk about books, etc. However, this doesn't make any sense if parents aren't contributing' (no. 6, 1997, 3) and 'Parents have a supportive role to play by paying attention to a perfect home environment' (no. 7, 1997, 2). The normative-pedagogical discourse suggests what parents should pursue in their parenting practice to improve the schooling of their children and to support teachers.

The final discourse that we identified in the older issues of 'Klasse voor Ouders' is an *optimisation discourse*. In this discourse, parents are asked to express their opinions about the quality of the magazine and the themes that are discussed to ensure that the magazine addresses the needs of parents. Examples include, 'What do you think about this magazine?' (no. 9, 1997, 8) and 'We get a lot of mail, but we are still waiting for that one letter from you!' (no. 4, 1996, 8). This optimisation discourse in 'Klasse voor Ouders' presents a continuous assessment of the needs and preferences of parents to ensure that the magazine reaches its target group.

In the recent issues of 'Klasse voor Ouders', a *normative-parenting discourse*, distinct from the normative-educational discourse in the earlier issues, can be found. As was the case in the issues of 'Klasse voor Ouders' from the beginning period, this discourse recommends specific parenting ideals and focuses on how to achieve these ideals. However, the ideals that are recommended are less intended to support educational practice in schools but are more intended to improve the quality of parenting itself. The magazine suggests what good parenting is and includes ready-made tips and tricks to guide parents on how to act in certain situations. For instance, while grocery shopping, 'Follow these tricks to become a grocery shopper without the blush of shame' (no. 118, 2008, 9); when teaching children how to share, 'This can help, because, as a parent, you want your child to share things with others' (no. 116, 2008, 9). This normative discourse is concerned with the 'pedagogy' of parenting and attempts to improve parenting quality by recommending ideals that parents should pursue and by describing how they should achieve those ideals.

The recent issues also present specific information about the formal organisation of education and schools and changes in that organisation. This discourse can be termed a *school-organisational discourse*. Its focus is on the explanation of diverse rules, norms and procedures within education to permit parents to participate actively in education. For instance, parents are informed about ‘what a special need coordinator is’ (no. 116, 2008, 8), ‘what a Freinet method school is’ (no. 117, 2008, 8) and ‘to what extent schools are obliged to inform both parents’ (no. 116, 2008, 8).

Whereas in the older issues, the governmental interference aims in the first place at enhancing the quality of education in schools; the recent issues show an emerging focus on and concern with the sphere of parenting itself by assigning increasing responsibility to parents. How the government tries to point out this responsibility to parents can be documented when considering the ways of performing actions on the readers, and thus by examining the genres.

Genres

As a discursive practice, the educational magazine includes several genres or ways of performing actions on readers beyond merely distributing information. Analogous to the discourses, we distinguished differences between the older and more recent issues of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’.

The first important genre in the older issues of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ is a *popularising science genre*. This genre aims to edit, simplify and summarise scientific research and makes use of specific techniques, such as the personalisation of experts (interviews with researchers), translation of research (the use of ‘common’ language) and visualisation of results (the use of diagrams and charts). On the one hand, this popularised scientific information is informative. On the other hand, these articles seem designed to convince parents about the significance of scientific research for their parenting practice with introductory phrases such as ‘recent studies show that’ or ‘it is scientifically proven that’. Statements such as ‘recent studies show that one in four of all deadly pedestrian victims are children’ (no. 4, 1996, 1) or ‘66% of all teachers think aggression by children is occurring more and more and report they are spending more time in handling problem behaviours by pupils than they used to’ (no. 5, 1997, 1) do not leave much room for counterarguments concerning the seriousness of these problems or for parents to refuse to consider these findings. Scientific data therefore are provided to explain the seriousness of certain social problems, and they serve as objective arguments to ensure that parents will contribute to solving these problems by considering the suggested scientific data.

The second genre is a *self-assessment genre*. The magazine encourages parents to engage in a self-evaluation of their own practice to attune their parenting with the information presented in the diverse articles. Parents are encouraged to reflect on their practice, which has become very clear in quotes, such as ‘Are you at least equally careful about other children while you are driving?’ (no. 4, 1996, 6), ‘Do you feel like checking your own parenting style?’ (no. 7, 1997, 5) and ‘In regard to plans for the future of your child, do you always think about your child or ...?’ (no. 9, 1997, 2). These statements lay a particular claim on parents: they can and must continuously assess what they are doing to improve the quality of their own parenting practice.

Finally, a *promotional-activation genre* can be identified, in which all types of activities, trainings, courses and interesting organisations are enlisted to encourage parents to participate. Examples include references to the confederation of parents (no. 5, 1997, 5), a reading programme (no. 5, 1997, 7) and a day trip to a museum (no. 8, 1997, 7). These are short announcements with information (on date, place, price) included, but they also contain promotional language in the use of superlatives and phrases, such as ‘Whoever visits a museum from time to time with their children, opens a new world for them. So what are you waiting for?’ (no. 8, 1997, 7). To stimulate parents even more, free tickets, discounts and gadgets are distributed: ‘We have 500 t-shirts ready for the same amount of kids who enrol in this activity. If you fill in this voucher as fast as you can, your child will be glimmering with this t-shirt!’ (no. 9, 1997, 6). Parents thus are addressed as potentially interested in training and other learning activities, and hence, they should be informed about what the market is offering in that regard.

In the recent issues, an *experiential genre* overtakes the previously described popularising science genre and self-assessment genre. This experiential genre opposes the popularising science genre in the older issues of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’; the narrated experiences of parents rather than popularised scientific knowledge play a central role in attempts to improve the quality of parenting. These experiences aim to convince parents about the significance of other parents’ experiences for their parenting practice and to encourage them to evaluate and adjust their own parenting by reflecting on the published experiences and good practices of their fellow parents. Each issue of the newer magazine begins with a ‘random’ experience of a parent, such as a funny story about heartache (no. 116, 2008, 1) or an unexpected compliment (no. 117, 2008, 1). Parents are encouraged to send their experiences to the editors of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ with phrases, such as ‘Do you also have an experience or consideration concerning parenting and education that you would like to publish in “Klasse voor Ouders”?’ (no. 116, 2008, 2) or ‘Please send your experience to the following address. A surprise is waiting for you!’ (no. 117, 2008, 2). Thus, the self-assessment genre that encourages parents to engage in a self-evaluation is still present in the recent issues. However, the self-assessment is promoted more by means of reflection on the published practices and contextualised experiences of other parents rather than self-assessment in view of decontextualised scientific data.

The combined result of all these genres is that parental ideals are not merely mentioned or offered in a detached way, but they are always framed in such a way that parents come to consider it obvious to pursue these ideals. Beyond the self-proclaimed aims of communication and information, ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ seems to point out parents as responsible for the quality of their own parenting practice, first by means of scientific data, later on – because of raising critical voices on the framing of parenting as ‘a profession’ rather than ‘a practice’ – by means of narrated practices of other parents.

Profiles of characters

The educational magazine not only includes different discourses and genres but also stages actors in what is written. The main actors that are ‘pictured’ are parents, teachers and pupils, and specific profiles of characters can be found.

The parents

The first characters – and, obviously, the protagonists in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ – are the parents. They appear in four ways. First, parents are presented as a *homogeneous entity* without any further social, cultural or economic differentiation (related to gender, class or ethnic origin). Parents always appear in plural and are pictured in terms of their *parental* responsibilities, disregarding who they are and where they come from. They are approached as responsible for creating a favourable childhood for their children and are considered to have responsibilities towards schooling: ‘All parents have a supporting role for schools. They have to spend lots of time creating a suitable climate at home’ (no. 7, 1997, 2). However, this homogeneity does not exclude variation; fathers and mothers, Flemish and foreigners, Catholics and parents of other religions are all staged in the magazine and all are considered to be important in view of sharing stories. However, these variations are not problematised or addressed as such; rather, they appear as illustrations of the ‘community’ of parents. Second, parents are presented as *the first teachers of children* and are thus considered to have the primary responsibility for children’s development. Parents are encouraged to take this responsibility by means of statements, such as ‘But in the classroom, there is no traffic. Parents should take their kids to the streets!’ (no. 4, 1996, 6) and ‘There is always a school library but it makes no sense if parents never talk about books or go to the library with their kids!’ (no. 6, 1997, 3). This is certainly the case in older issues, whereas recent issues emphasise the need for complementarity between parents and schools through tips and tricks for diverse topics, such as bullying (no. 117, 2008, 4), nutrition (no. 120, 2009, 2) and hygiene (no. 120, 2009, 10). Next, parents are presented as *experienced practitioners* who have a significant amount of parenting experience that needs to be shared with other parents and teachers. The sharing is meant to stimulate spontaneous dialogue and the exchange of good practices with the intention of learning from each other. Although this profile of the parent is already somewhat present in the older issues of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ through stories about, for instance, the loss of a son (no. 4, 1996, 6) and handling children’s tantrums (no. 5, 1997, 2), this approach is found more frequently in recent issues of the magazine. The introduction and final text in each of the last issues presents an experience told by the parents themselves rather than by the editors of ‘Klasse voor Ouders’. Finally, parents are staged as *active participants in education* who break through the walls of parenting and contribute to the situation at school ‘because only then education can be efficient’ (no. 9, 1997, 8). This approach is demonstrated by numerous articles concerning parents’ participation in schools (no. 116, 2008, 2; 121, 2009, 4; 122, 2009, 4; etc.). The staging of parents in terms of their ability to participate is close related to considering them as in need of basic information about education and school life. Diverse articles (no. 118, 2008, 4; 119, 2009, 4; etc.) as well as the recurring section ‘School’ reflect the characteristics of the parent as active participant that needs information for actual participation.

The teacher

The second character in ‘Klasse voor Ouders’ is the teacher, who, in contrast to the parent as protagonist, always appears in the third person. She is not given her own voice but is spoken about. In all of the studied issues, the teacher is staged as a

sensitive and responsive person; she is one of the main actors who can intercept pupils' signals and address them properly. Examples include articles about signs of bullying (no. 8, 1997, 4), drugs (no. 6, 1997, 1) and stress (no. 118, 2008, 6). The magazine underlines that the teachers' task should no longer be seen as simply transferring content knowledge but as contributing to the full development of pupils. In doing so, teachers are pictured as *reflective practitioners* who continuously reflect on their own practice and question their actions as teachers. In other words, a teacher is presented as a person who endlessly asks herself 'What should I do to be a good teacher for every pupil/student?' Statements such as 'Teachers should reflect on their actions and approach some children differently' (no. 7, 1997, 2) and 'Teachers should become conscious of this [encouragement of stereotype behaviour in society] because they can do something about this' (no. 8, 1997, 2) suggest that teachers have a responsibility in the upbringing of children, and, in order to reduce unconscious but 'harmful' ways of approaching pupils, they are considered to revise their own practice on a permanent basis.

The child/pupil

The last character staged in 'Klasse voor Ouders' is the child or the pupil. Analogously with the character of the teacher, the pupil almost always appears in the third person, except for in one article (no. 116, 2008, 6). Pupils are never addressed directly in the magazine. The main focus is the role and responsibility of parents, and children appear as the main 'target' or 'object' of concern of the parental practice in relation to school affairs. Consequently, the only way a pupil is pictured, is as a *growing and developing person*, and hence, as someone whose development needs to be supported explicitly by her parents and the school. Quotes such as 'We need to teach kids how to handle luxury' (no. 6, 1997, 1), 'Everything has to do with practising' (no. 4, 1996, 7) and 'Choosing is a skill, and kids need to learn this skill' (no. 9, 1997, 1) demonstrate this character. The child or pupil is profiled as the central and shared concern of parenting and school education, and her wellbeing and development is the common objective. The central staging as 'object of concern' is demonstrated by the placement of a picture of a child or pupil on the cover of almost every issue of the magazine.

The previous findings show that parents are profiled throughout the 'order of discourse' of 'Klasse voor Ouders' as responsible characters that have the obligation to create a favourable childhood for their children. As readers of the magazines, they are addressed as in need of being reflective about their parenting practices, in need of sharing experiences and in need of being partners of the school in raising their children. Whereas 'Klasse voor Ouders' is believed to be and often presents itself as a formal and neutral information and communication project by the government, there is clearly more at stake. Therefore, a critical interpretation of the 'order of discourse' at the level of parents' and governments' positioning is needed. By means of an in-depth examination that focuses on the power and positioning effects of the magazine, it becomes possible to explore how the magazine constitutes a defined public space.

Power effects: the discursive positioning of the parent and the government

As a final step, we look for the positioning of parents and the government, and more specifically, for how they are asked to look at themselves, to behave and to interrelate with each other. As indicated in the methodological section, we do not focus on the actual social effects or social context of discursive practices but seek to clarify the discursive effects. The focus on the discursive effects considers on how parents (as the readers of the magazine) are positioned and are asked to make part of the (constituted) educational reality in relation to the positioning of the government. In line with Foucault, our focus is not on formally imposed obligations or restrictions but on the role of an order of discourse in the 'conduct of conduct', that is, how the magazine steers parents by opening up a very defined space of conduct (Foucault 1982). For this reason, we describe this positioning in terms of the promoted 'willingness' or 'drive'; parents' willingness and what they want and see as self-evident 'drives' them to act in a certain way.

The positioning of parents

First, parents are positioned as being in need of good experiential stories of other parents and, hence, as having a '*drive to share and learn from experiences*'. Through the order of discourse in 'Klasse voor Ouders', parents are understood as experienced practitioners who share relevant experiences with other parents and learn from each other based on feelings of solidarity. These published experiences are always parental success stories. This makes these experiences function as a form of assessment, a pedagogical norm, as parents are encouraged to reflect on their own parenting practice by comparing it with the described experiences and thus with what is seen as 'right'. Consequently, in 'Klasse voor Ouders', certain ideals of parenting are promoted, and these parenting ideals and 'norms' of good parents are embodied in the published experience itself. The publication of experiences in this magazine indicates both 'what is' and 'what should be' and creates an environment where permanent professionalisation becomes at once obvious and necessary. Therefore, good parents are ones who actively participate in the exchange of experiences by sending good practices to the editors of 'Klasse voor Ouders' and by letting themselves be inspired by the good practices published in the magazine.

Furthermore, parents are placed in a position where they should be '*driven to engage in dialogue*'. Parents are seen not only as a source of good practices but also as fellows in dialogue who can share their experiences and their struggles with questions and uncertainties. This is strongly articulated by the diverse reader questions where parents' need for instant information to improve their parenting practice is combined with answers to these questions in the form of tips and tricks by other parents. In addition to the drive to share good practices (and thus the publishing of these practices), 'Klasse voor Ouders' brings parents together, 'face to face', by means of a dialogue to find solutions for readers' question. It is striking to note that the answers to these questions never contain experiences of parenting failures, but only good examples of how to deal properly with a particular parenting situation.

Finally, parents are understood as having a '*drive to become partners in the school practice*'. The order of discourse constitutes a reality in which parents are expected to think of themselves as partners in the realisation of high-quality education; they are considered not only parents' but also childrens' first teachers. Because

they possess important information, parents are put in a position that allows teachers to adjust their practice to the needs and desires of the growing and developing children. Consequently, parents and teachers are positioned as partners in supporting the learning processes of children that take place at school and at home. They need to share educational-psychological information, so both parties can optimally support these processes and adjust their practices to the needs and potential of the children. As parents are encouraged to participate in schools, the family life and school life are being brought together to facilitate this collaboration.

In sum, the magazine positions parents as experienced practitioners who need to share good practices, who want and need to learn from the experiences of other parents and who are expected to engage in dialogue with their 'fellows' and to participate in school practice. Although parents are seen as people who possess important knowledge due to their diverse experiences, this knowledge and these experiences are at the same time considered insufficient. This insufficiency is both assumed and created through the need for continuous monitoring and improvement of the quality of parenting practices. Parents are asked to unceasingly add value to their own parenting practice. They are expected to see their parenting practice as open to continuous improvement and hence in need of a permanent attention to 'quality'. We suggest for that reason that the three 'drives' can be regarded as components of a more general drive: *a 'drive' for quality and improvement* (Simons and Masschelein 2006). When the magazine turns parenting into something that needs added value or quality assurance and improvement, it becomes difficult, or even irresponsible, to consider parenting as something that is self-evident, partly unreflective and isolated from school education. As indicated earlier, a evolution can be noted here. Whereas older issues of the magazine suggested that enhancing quality and improving parenting practice was stimulated by experts and thus by theoretical and scientific knowledge, the recent issues call upon the available expertise within educational and parenting practice itself. In the recent issues, parents are at the centre of the magazine; it is their knowledge – expressed in narrated experiences or examples of good practices – that appears as important and useful. This finding allows us to say that 'Klasse voor Ouders' is no longer merely a magazine for parents but has become a magazine for and by 'parent-as-experts'.

The positioning of the government in relation to the positioning of the parent

The positioning of parents as in need of good practices for continuous improvement, and as willing to engage in dialogue with other parents and to participate in education, allows us to take a closer look at the suggested task for the government. Parents can only behave in this well-defined way when they have opportunities and space to do so. Therefore, the positioning of parents as responsible for quality and improvement correlates with the positioning of the government as in charge and in control of these issues, and it is responsible for creating a, what we like to call, 'parental learning community'. The government is positioned as an agency responsible for creating a place where parenting is framed as in need of quality improvement and where experiences, questions and information can be shared and structured to facilitate learning. This governmentally initiated and facilitated community ensures that parents can receive and share good practices, engage in dialogue with other parents and participate in education to continuously enhance the quality of their parenting practices. In doing so, parents are *made* responsible for the quality of their own parenting practice and for

their children's education in schools. This responsabilisation of parents and parenting, and the related self-evidence of the discourse of 'Klasse voor Ouders', is accompanied by a clear message: failure to participate in this parental learning community and to learn from shared experiences puts the quality of education and parenting at risk. Government thus is positioned as the agency that organises and facilitates an exclusive learning community based on shared experiences and practices, and through that, government plays a role in aligning the family and the school, parents and teachers as part of the constitution of a common horizon of permanent (quality) improvement.

The positioning of state government through the magazine 'Klasse voor Ouders' is in line with what authors such as Cruikshank (1999), Daun (2002), Dean (1999), Olssen, Codd, and O'Neill (2004) and Rose (1996) generally describe as the shift towards an 'advanced liberal' mode of governing. This mode of governing promotes entrepreneurship and choice and creates spaces of competition but also for collaboration and community-building in view of increased (human) resource mobilisation. Centralised, uniform intervention and centralised reform are no longer regarded as the tasks of central government, but instead, central government attempts to 'activate' organisations, communities and individuals to produce their own welfare and wellbeing, and to 'responsibilise' them to look for added value or for continuous quality improvement. Central government is positioned as enabling, facilitating and creating the conditions, in which local agencies and actors become 'change agents' that are oriented towards 'added value'. This 'governing at a distance' implies that every individual or agency is addressed as being responsible for its own production of quality and that communities and networks function as collective resources for these individuals to fuel change and develop quality (Simons and Masschelein 2006; Lerner 2000; Olssen, Codd, and O'Neill 2004). The magazine 'Klasse voor Ouders', both in its role and its content, can be regarded as an articulation of this mode of governing. Central government is put into an enabling position and is expected to create a space where parents are asked to take responsibility for their own parenting practice. This positioning of central government correlates with the positioning of parents as 'managers of the self' who should think of their own parenting practice in terms of quality or added value, consider themselves learners with a need to share good practices, engage in dialogue with other parents and actors in education and participate together with others in the education practices of their children.

Conclusion

'Klasse voor Ouders' is not only a neutral and formal tool for distributing information and communication; it should also be regarded as a strategic instrument that makes part of how education is governed today. As indicated, this analysis does not aim to identify the concrete social effects of these discourses or how parents give meaning to or behave in accordance with the order of discourse. Although further study of the discursive effects on processes of 'subjectification' in everyday life would be interesting and important, this study had another aim. The objective of this study was to understand the changed relationship between the government and the field of education, specifically how this takes shape in new policy instrumentation around parents and parenting. This article highlights how discursive policy instrumentation includes steering, how these steering mechanisms actually work, what the consequences are, what is taken for granted, and how this policy instrumentation organises what can and can no longer be said and hence the public space, in which

parenting is debated (Halpern 2010; Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007; Newman, Barnett, and Mahoney 2010).

An important and critical issue we want to raise in conclusion is how 'Klasse voor Ouders' contributes to the (re-)organisation of the public sphere (Verckens 2011). 'Klasse voor Ouders' understands parents as involved in learning from theoretical knowledge and experiences and striving for quality and improvement. These experiences as well as the information provided by experts in education and parenting make it possible to compare one's own practices with those of other parents. The magazine operates through providing 'feedback information' as the basis for permanent improvement of parents' behaviour (and of their relation to school education). In this way, the magazine functions as a collection of 'evidence' or a 'common (narrative/experimental) ground' for 'what works' or 'what allows (parents) to learn'. Hence, it also shapes the horizon of 'what parents can and should do' (Simons 2007). In other words, as 'feedback information', the information in 'Klasse voor Ouders' cultivates a consensus among parents about what makes sense and what does not make sense – that is, what is important and what can count as a (good or bad) example or what functions as an inspirational experience. One could argue that such uniformisation and cultivation inhibits public debate (Verckens 2011). These pieces of 'evidence' do not require discussion and are not part of a debate. Rather, they come to 'speak for themselves'; that is, they open up a space for learning and improvement for the readers (parents), not for discussion and negotiation. In line with this approach, one could argue that 'Klasse voor Ouders' neutralises the public debate in education. By cultivating a common horizon and by positioning parents as learners and improvers who need (good) examples and (inspirational) experiences, there is no place for a public debate with people who speak on behalf of something that is not 'evidence' in this way, that is difficult to frame in the discourse of experiences, examples and expertise and that cannot speak for itself in the learning community. In this regard, it is important to note that the focus on personal stories, expert voices, learning opportunities and consensual operations does not allow, for instance, the often ill-articulated 'voice' and visualised 'picture' of forms of exclusion and injustice to be raised. For instance, the presentation of parents as a homogeneous entity with diverse personal stories and individual experiences could prevent discussions about particular structural mechanisms. One could argue that a 'public' magazine should also enable such a debate; that is, it should allow for democratic disagreement in view of the composition of a common, educational world instead of a pacification in view of save learning opportunities and ongoing search for added value (Decuypere, Simons, and Masschelein 2011).

Based on the findings of this study, we argue for further research on how policy instruments that rely on narratives, good practices and experiences become strategically important in the governance of education today. Although there is an increased focus on policy instrumentation, we consider it an important challenge to pay special attention to these experience- and narrative-based and community-oriented instruments. Often, instruments such as these are considered a reaction or even an alternative to so-called hard neoliberal policy instrumentation. Yet, they may actually contribute to that advanced liberal policy agenda and as a consequence, it is very important that their effect and impact becomes visible and that their legitimacy can be questioned.

Notes

1. The word 'Klasse' in Dutch can be interpreted in two ways. First, it refers to the classroom, the 'class'; second, it can be understood as a word that adds value, such as 'class' or 'classy' in English.
2. The magazine 'Klasse' started in 1990 with five employees and a printing of 3000 copies. Each school received only two copies to share. Since 1994, the distribution has increased so that every teacher and principal can receive a personal copy on a monthly basis. In 1996, the first 'Klasse voor Ouders' was distributed. Secondary school students received the first issue of their youth magazine in 1997. With these three editions of 'Klasse', 900,000 copies were distributed every month, and the staff grew to ten members. In 2000, pupils from primary schools received their personal copy, named 'Yeti', for the first time. In the following years, the number of staff members and the volume of the magazines have continued to increase.
3. Except for the very first three issues since these issues still showed some instability because of the developmental stage of the magazine.
4. In the following references, we omit the name of the magazine 'Klasse voor Ouders' to improve the readability of this article.

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